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ABSTRACT

Attrition at Empire State College (ECS) is calculated in terms of three types of counts: temporal, activity, and degree progress. The strategy for assessing attrition using these three quantitative techniques is discussed as are qualitative phone interviews. The attrition rate in terms of a temporal count was 28 percent. Phone interviews with 93 leavers in early 1975 showed that the dropout tends to be younger than currently enrolled students, single, working full time in a lower status occupation and enrolled as a half-time student. Students left the college primarily because of personal reasons or job related problems. Poor student-mentor relationships was the top college related reason. Additional findings on the effects of ESC experience, suggestions for improvement, and policy implications for educators and administrators are discussed. A multiple perspectives strategy for examining policy implications of the data is illustrated. (Author)

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Attrition At A Nontraditional Institution

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INTRODUCTION

Attrition studies grace shelves throughout academe. Despite impressive methodological schemes and lofty expectations among institutional researchers, the results too often have fallen into the faint praise realm of "interesting."[1] However, the current and projected reduced enrollment pool in American higher education creates a climate in which information about leavers is valuable and necessary. Almost all institutions need to learn such things as whether they have programmatic features that are driving people away, what types of students they serve well, are there important groups--minorities, older, brighter, financially disadvantaged--not well served, and what changes might help retain current dropouts? Into this evolving scene, Empire State College (ESC) has arrived with an explicit mandate from New York State to serve students previously not well served and to monitor its success and failures.

At the previous two AIR Forums, we have presented aspects of Empire's comprehensive research and evaluation program. A cornerstone of the program is to conduct studies which reflect several perspectives: administration, faculty, students, State officials, and others. This paper will detail the strategy for attrition research at ESC and discuss implications of the findings in terms of the multiple perspectives.

PROBLEMS FOR ATTRITION STUDIES AT EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE

Empire, a statewide public college without a campus, has a year-round calendar and serves its students in a highly flexible manner that makes short-term step-out

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[1] President Thaddeus Seymour of Wabash College in a talk to institutional research directors of the Great Lakes Colleges Association in 1970 uses as his theme: "Institutional research can be vital if it avoids studies that are 'merely' 'interesting' and not 'vital' to better-informed decision-making."

simple. Because ESC employs learning contracts rather than classes, the step-out student loses no ground by filling out a withdrawal form but merely makes no further progress until he/she decides to re-enroll. Re-enrollment also is accomplished by completing a straightforward form. Thus, the number of withdrawn students changes daily and only the recent development of equally flexible computer systems makes accurate attrition studies practical. ESC's nature also creates interpretation difficulties to go with these technical counting problems.

Some common findings in attrition studies are that students withdraw because of low grades, diminishing motivation, financial difficulties, homesickness, loneliness, dislike of roommates, illness, etc. (Astin, 1972; Fenstemacher, 1973; Iffert, 1965; Hannah, 1969). Most of these and other similar reasons either do not apply to ESC or apply differently because Empire serves a student body averaging 37 years in age with 60% employed full-time while studying and 63% married. The response "diminished motivation" for a 34 year old welder with a family is seldom another way of saying: "I want to hitchhike across Europe." Some factors that further complicate an ESC attrition study include the College's practice of granting up to 80% of a bachelor's degree on the basis of demonstrated prior learning leaving as little as six months of remaining study, the individualized degree programs that require students to specify objectives, and the primary role played by a student's faculty mentor in making ESC a rewarding learning experience.[1] Furthermore, to fully understand the difficulties of studying withdrawals at Empire, these unique factors must be added to the problems inherent in attrition research for any institution: determining why

[1]These features are discussed more fully in previous AIR papers--Bradley and Palola, 1973; Bradley, 1974)--and in other documents listed in the references so we will not dwell on them here.

the students enrolled in the first place, deciding which withdrawn students are indeed dropouts, achieving an adequate response rate, obtaining candid answers, and ending up with findings that can be compared to those on studies at other institutions (Summerskill, 1962).

A STRATEGY FOR ASSESSING ATTRITION

A premise of the three-year cost/effectiveness project[1] of the ESC Office of Research and Evaluation is that the appropriate way to examine effectiveness is to use quantitative measures in concert with qualitative techniques (Bradley, 1974). This premise has similarly guided our strategy for assessing attrition, an element of the cost/effectiveness study. Aspects of both the quantitative and qualitative techniques will be applicable to attrition studies at many institutions, both traditional and nontraditional.

Quantitative

When Empire State College's computer systems are fully operational, we will have three types of attrition counts: temporal, activity, and degree progress. The temporal count provides the most comprehensible data and helps with an immediate problem at Empire, defining attrition.

Short-term withdrawal, as noted earlier, is encouraged at ESC so we needed a way to decide when a step-out becomes a dropout. Early experience with the temporal count which monitors the length of time that students in a given cohort remain withdrawn suggested that an appropriate definition of attrition is: a student withdrawn for eight consecutive months or more. This span of time is roughly equivalent to two traditional semesters, and provides modest comparability to other studies. Many students withdrawn for less than eight consecutive months re-enroll.

The results of a temporal count taken on a cohort established in 1973-74 are on Figure 1. Nearly one-third of the 877 is now "attrition." Some studies (e.g.,

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[1]This paper reports on research from a project, "Developing Cost/Effectiveness Models for Postsecondary Education," partially funded by the HEW Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. Ernest G. Palola is Project Director.

Astin, 1972; Fenstemacher, 1972; Chickering and Hannah, 1969) indicate that this is not a particularly high rate for a college in the first year. However, Empire's unusual, often highly educated student generally receives much advanced standing and can in no way be termed "freshmen." As data is received from similar institutions or dissimilar ones using a similar methodology, modest comparisons will be made.

Almost one-quarter of the cohort have taken advantage of Empire's advanced standing opportunities and graduated. The remainder is currently enrolled (33%) or withdrawn for less than eight 28-day months (10%). We will continue temporal counts on the cohort until all are either graduates or attrition.

The second quantitative measure is the activity count which looks at how much successful effort a student has made at Empire. This count is important because a learning contract has no fixed length nor does it end until a student completes all specified work. Thus, two students might each be enrolled for ten months, one completing three contracts and a portfolio for advanced standing and the other nothing. Thus, the activity count helps measure how "tragic" was the case of a given leaver.

An activity count of the cohort leavers shows that 29% completed no learning contracts, 27% completed one, an additional 24% two, 13% three, 7% four, and 1% five. Since many graduates have completed their studies in two-three contracts, it appears that many leavers made a tangible commitment to their studies.

The third type of count, degree progress, also measures the extent of the personal "tragedy." This count looks at how far a student was from degree completion which can be determined as soon as the individualized Degree Program and the assessment of prior formal and nonformal learning are approved.

The possible range is from six credit months to 32. Computer programs are not yet completed for this count so adequate data is unavailable. Our personal observations, however, indicate that few students drop out after portfolio completion and close to a degree.

Qualitative

The quantitative aspects of an attrition study are useful for planning and getting a sense of the magnitude of the withdrawal problem but, in order to make appropriate changes, it is more important to learn why people left and what might be done about the reasons. In tackling these problems, the ESC Office of Research and Evaluation has had excellent success with phone interviews which were first used while investigating attrition as part of the Self-Study for accreditation (Lehmann, 1974). Phone interviews are efficient in terms of overall time, well-received by respondents, give virtually a 100% response rate of those contacted, are inexpensive, are relatively unobtrusive, allow give-and-take on complicated responses, and provide the researchers with a sense of whether the respondent is being frank. Furthermore, analysis is often easier because coding of quantifiable items is done by the interviewer immediately after the interview.

In the 1975 phone interviews, we drew a two-thirds sample (189) of the attrition group and reached 94 (50%). One person declined to participate. Of those not reached, 56 (30%) had moved with no forwarding address or had left an incorrect phone number. The interviewers had an occasional chuckle over these as they reached Dial A Prayer, Weather Information, and the emergency number for a cemetery monument business. Overall, however, the phone technique was a great success as we went from the first call to computer-run marginals in 15 business days.

While findings are discussed at some length in the next section, a somewhat unexpected one affects the interpretation of the counts: 13 of 93 (14%) withdrawn

students clearly were not dropouts in the true sense. Four students had used Empire as an enrichment of their studies in other colleges, four were technical withdrawals waiting for certain documents to be processed which would clear them for graduation, and five had already re-enrolled in the 25 days since they were identified on the temporal count. (The last group indicates that eight consecutive 28-day months may not be a sufficient definition of attrition.) If the phone survey random sample group is typical of the overall attrition pool, a more accurate attrition rate after a year (Figure 1) is 28.3%, not 32.8%.

FINDINGS OF THE PHONE SURVEY

Characteristics of ESC Leavers

In Figure 2, we have compared selected demographic characteristics of ESC leavers and current students. The leavers were more likely to be typical college age, single, working full time, and enrolled as half-time students. The age and marital status findings seem to suggest that students in the modal categories for the College have a higher probability of completing their studies. Certain selected occupations also show the contrast between the two groups. For example, about 25% of the dropouts were employed in professional and semi-professional occupations (e.g., teacher, nurse, veterinarian assistant) compared to 32% of the current students. In contrast, 29% of the attrition group held blue collar jobs (e.g., telephone operator, machinist) while 21% of the current students held such jobs. For all other occupations, there was little difference between the two groups.

The basic finding above is not generally supported by other studies. Fenstemacher (1973) found married persons more likely to leave. Although over half the ESC students who leave are married, it is the single group that show greater likelihood to depart.[4] However, Empire's "adult" student body probably makes

such comparisons inappropriate. Astin's (1972) national study of dropouts revealed that more men than women persisted to graduation which also is in contrast to ESC data (Lehmann, 1974). Only McIntosh and Morrison (1974) in studies at the nontraditional Open University in England has described demographic findings similar to Empire.

Reasons for Leaving

The attrition group gave several reasons for leaving Empire (Figure 3). By far the largest group of reasons were personal in nature. Forty-one percent of the leavers stated that health, family problems, or moving out of the community were the basic cause of their withdrawal. For example, one female student withdrew because of pressure from her spouse resulting from "too many meetings with her male mentor." Another left shortly after a serious injury befell her daughter. Still another found that job, family, and study were adversely affecting her health. Almost one third (31%) said that job-related problems were the basic reason for withdrawal. Leavers said that they could not handle the scheduling or reallocation of their time so that both college work and job responsibilities could be handled in a satisfactory manner. For example, several claimed that new jobs required too much of their time to also allow study. One man who trains unemployment insurance counselors said that he would return to Empire "when prosperity strikes again." Just over one-fifth (21%) of the dropouts cited poor relationships with their faculty mentors as a prime reason for withdrawal. Either the former students had a mentor they did not like or the relationship was unsatisfying and unproductive. For example, one felt that ESC was not recruiting mentors who relate to people, but rather "scholars." One was crushed by a mentor who did not feel she was doing acceptable work though "I've always been an 'A' student. I can show you transcripts." Financial problems and problems with ESC's program each accounted for 15% of the reasons. Problems withESC's "red tape" (especially with the billing process) and with the

preparation of a portfolio for advanced standing were both cited by 12% of the leavers.

The basic conclusion we draw from this data is that the top reasons cited for leaving are external to the College (personal and job problems). Problems with the faculty mentor are the major internal reason cited. Between one sixth and one tenth of the leavers identified problems with the portfolio for advanced standing, problems with ESC's program and/or procedures, or a poor match between personal goals and College objectives. An example of the student goal and College mismatch is one student who found no mentor in yoga and left for California. A minority of leavers (some 10-15%) were not prepared to take on the responsibilities of self-directed learning and thus encountered difficulties with ESC's educational program which requires a fair amount of student independence.

The data on reasons for withdrawing from ESC also contrasts rather sharply with several previous studies. Iffert in a national study (1965) found academic problems (45.8%) as the primary reason for dropping out followed by health and family (25.2%), financial (15.0%), and dissatisfactions with the institution (6.1%). Fenstemacher's (1972) research on dropouts in the Minnesota State College System found the top four reasons for withdrawal as: insufficient financial resources (48%); disappointed with academic program (48%); unhappy with the college experience (47%), and academic program not available (38%). In a national survey by Panos and Astin (1968), the top four reasons for leaving were: dissatisfied with college environment (27%); for females, marriage (29%); wanted time to reconsider interests and goals (26%); financial (24%); and changed career plans (22%). In a more recent national study, Astin (1972) found that dropouts were more likely to be employed during the school year, more likely to be married or plan to marry while in college and more likely to be concerned about financing college education.

Comparing the reasons stated by ESC dropouts with those stated by the more traditional college age student suggests again that the ESC student is indeed different. Because ESC students are older, and at a different stage in their life cycle, family obligations or ill health appear to be either more likely or more pressing. Thus personal problems, job problems and financial problems are three of the top four reasons at ESC for withdrawal that are not supported in most other studies reviewed.

One question in the phone interview asked each leaver with whom he/she discussed the decision to withdraw. About a quarter of the dropouts said they discussed the decision with no one while over half (57%) talked with their mentor and 22% talked with their spouse. When the leavers were asked what the reactions were from the people with whom the decision to withdraw was discussed, over three quarters stated that mentors, spouses and others supported the decision to withdraw. This high percentage of support for decision to withdraw conflicts again with another study where only 10% of the individuals counseled the potential dropout to leave (Hannah, 1969, p. 399).

Effects of ESC Experience

A particular concern of this office in the cost/effectiveness study is with perceived effects of the ESC experience. Figure 4 presents data on leaver perceptions of effects of the educational experience upon them. Increased level of knowledge and intellectual competence was noted by 40%. Another third reported gaining insight into themselves and enhanced their self-understanding. One-fifth replied that ESC was a positive experience and would probably have graduated if it were not for personal or financial problems that interfered. Twelve percent said there was no effect whatsoever and two percent indicated their ESC experience was completely negative.

When these specific findings are grouped according to the stated cognitive and affective objectives of the College, it is clear that the leavers identify with the affective side. The categories of self-understanding, clarifying purposes, increasing self-confidence, and knowing my limitations account for 78% of the responses. On the other hand, intellectual and job competence accounted for 42% of the responses. It seems clear that leavers attained considerable cognitive and developmental growth from their stay at the college while few dropouts reported no effects or negative effects. One final question asked about how the leavers now view ESC which supports the above conclusion. Fifty three percent said that all things considered they viewed ESC in a very favorable light, 36% were generally favorable; 4% were neutral; 5% were generally unfavorable and 1% was very unfavorable. Thus about 10% of the dropouts were neutral or unfavorable in their view of the College after they had been withdrawn for 8 months or more.

Suggestions for Improvement

When asked what ESC could do differently to prevent students from withdrawing, the leavers stated that increasing student-mentor dialogue, making mentors more accesible and providing better mentor guidance and advising (35%) was a first priority. Secondly, the dropouts recommended simplifying the assessment process and making it the first activity for the student after he enrolls (19%): "I was left high and dry when I got to assessment. I never figured out what to do." Third, the leavers felt that bureaucratic "red tape" should be lessened (13%) while providing greater access to learning centers and learning resources was fourth (12%). About eight percent said that the college needed to provide more group studies and residencies. Finally, increasing financial aid was a concern of about five percent of the dropouts.

Policy Implications for Educators and Administrators

The remainder of this paper takes two illustrative findings and spells out certain policy implications using a multiple perspectives strategy. A multiple persepctives

strategy suggests that a given finding may mean different things to different internal and external constituencies and, as a result , may propagate several lines of corrective action.

The first finding we will discuss is that 21% of the leavers identified poor student-mentor relationships as a major cause of their withdrawal. From the student's point of view, a poor relationship with a mentor cripples a primary reason for attending ESC--individualized attention. Because the student-mentor relationship is crucial to the successful completion of an individualized program like ESC's, students finding themselves in an unsatisfying or unproductive relationship cannot fall back on more traditional campus supports (other faculty, peer groups, extracurricular activities, etc.) and therefore face a choice of stepping out or staying in an unpleasant situation. From a faculty point of view, attrition is often discussed as a quality control issue. At ESC, mentors might argue that not all students are ready for or prepared to handle independent study. Therefore, dependent students may expect to be hand fed by their mentors and when this does not happen, find the relationship unsatisfactory. Faculty frequently say the intensive face-to-face interaction with four or five students every day burns them out and thus may subtly encourage more dependent students to consider leaving the college. From another point of view, the student-mentor relationship problems resulted in two administrative recommendations in the recent institutional self-study (ESC Self-Study, 1974): the College should promote procedures that make change of mentors easier for students and should provide educational and career counseling beyond that now provided by mentors.

Multiple perspectives of the leaver profile--younger than most, single, lower status occupation, working full time, part-time student--are also possible. The admissions office might be alert to such characteristics in potential enrollees (especially since the basic admission criterion is the apparent ability to do ESC work). Faculty mentors might look at this profile and be prepared to provide

relatively more counsel and direction for such people. The Office of Research and Evaluation might monitor these characteristics in coming students to determine changes in the mix of the student body which might affect faculty work load, achievement of enrollment projections, number of tuition refunds, etc. Students who fit the profile might be more cautious about enrolling or more resolute afterward. Administrators may want to develop mechanisms for helping such students meet their academic obligations. For example, they might identify a consultant to assist at a workshop for faculty on counseling potential dropouts. State budget officials may want to review funding formulae since Empire is charged with serving such non-traditional students. Thus, the policy consequence of a finding depends upon the perspective of the viewer.

Final Observations

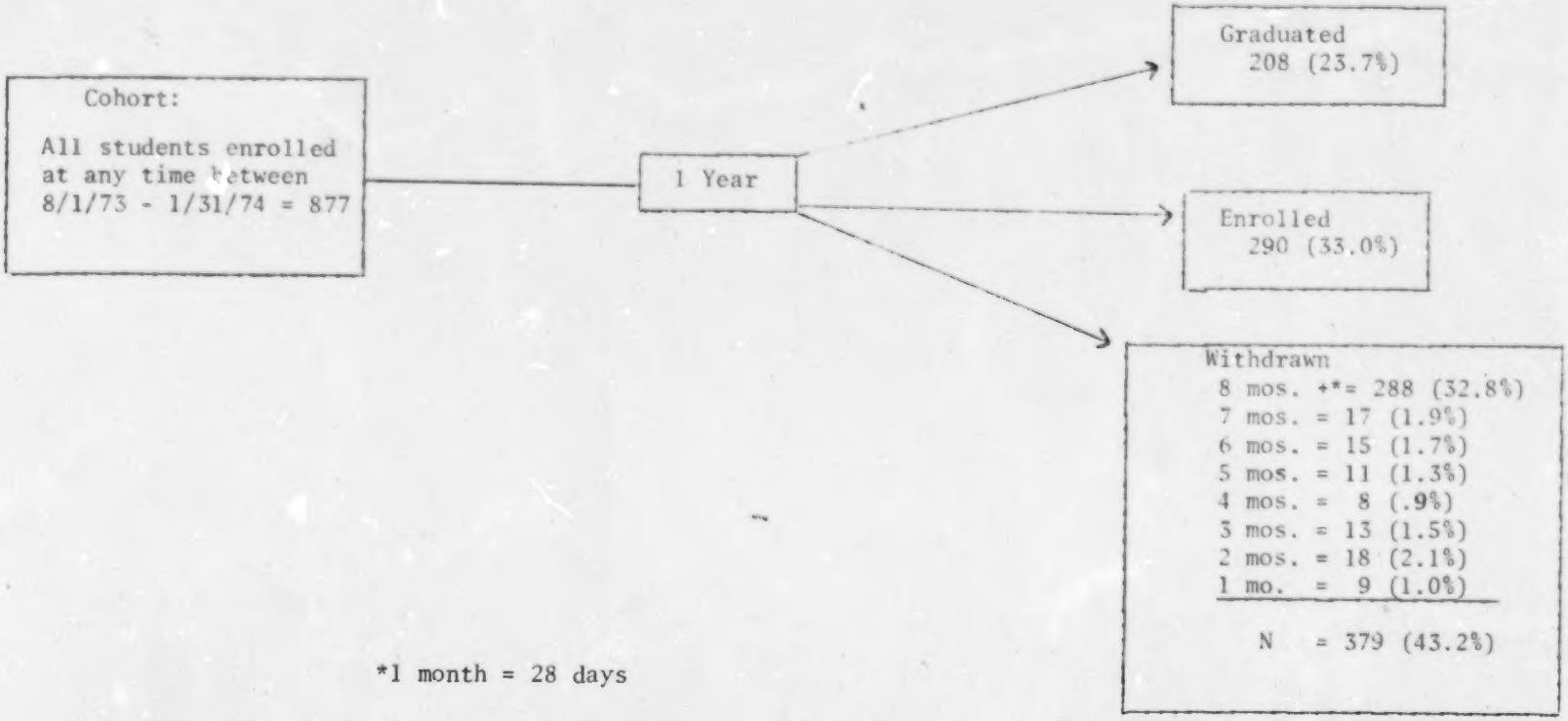
This paper disclosed the initial findings in a long-term attrition study that is part of the comprehensive cost/effectiveness research being conducted at Empire State College. The data shows that Empire leavers are unlike dropouts studied in attrition studies at traditional colleges. Since ESC attracts students who are on the average older, married, working full time, and in another part of the life cycle, there is little surprise that its leavers have different demographic characteristics and report different reasons for leaving from traditional dropouts. Only preliminary studies of the nontraditional body at the Open University show similar findings. As other institutions take steps to serve large numbers of older students in flexible ways, the methodology and findings reported here should prove of interest.

Several important questions remain for future study. For example, what percentage of the leavers who work full time were also attempting to handle full time study? Were these the ones who did not complete learning contracts? What characterizes the students who dropped out after completing several contracts? Will factor or

discriminant analysis techniques provide a clearer dropout profile? How will the Empire profile compare with that of other institutions, both traditional and non-traditional, that will be replicating the ESC methodology? A major report on attrition is being prepared by the Office of Research and Evaluation which will deal with these and other pertinent research questions. Tenatively titled "Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow--Again," it should be available in the fall of 1975.

Figure 1

Empire State College Attrition: Temporal Count



*1 month = 28 days

Figure 2

Selected Characteristics of ESC Leavers and Current Students
Empire State College Attrition Study

Characteristics	Leavers (N=93)	Current Students (N=483)
Sex: (Female)	47%	48%
Age:		
Average	37	37
Range	19-63	19-68
22 and under	22%	10%
Marital Status:		
Married	55%	63%
Single	34%	27%
Other	11%	10%
Employment: (Working Full Time)	73%	60%
Occupations:		
Professional	9%	11%
Semi-Professional	16%	21%
Skilled	3%	1%
Semi- or Unskilled	26%	20%
Housewife	2%	9%
Student Status:		
Full Time	55%	60%
Half Time	45%	40%

Sources: Attrition Phone Survey, ESC Student Experience Questionnaire, and College files.

Figure 3

Reasons for Withdrawal

Empire State College Attrition Study

Reasons for Withdrawal*	Percent
Personal problems (e.g., health, family obligations, moved away)	41
Job problems (e.g., too demanding of my time)	31
Mentor problems (e.g., did not like, unproductive relationship)	21
Financial problems	15
Problems with ESC program and/or procedures (e.g., confusing, too much independence for me)	15
Problems with bureaucracy (e.g., billing)	12
Problems with portfolio	12
Problems matching my goals to the College	9
No problems	5
Transfer to another college	4
Found ESC too structured	1
Other	6

*Since many respondents identified more than one reason for leaving, the percent total does not add up to 100%. The percentages were based on the number of responses for each reason.

Figure 4

Effects of Educational Experience at ESC

Empire State College Attrition Study

Effect Category	Percent*
For the work I did, I learned a lot (increased intellectual competence)	40
I gained new insight into myself (self-understanding)	32
ESC generally positive experience (I think I would have done well if not for personal or financial problems)	21
I increased my self-confidence	16
I got to know my limitations	15
ESC helped me to clarify my life purposes	15
No effect whatsoever	12
I'm disappointed that I did not complete my studies	10
It was a completely negative experience	2
ESC enabled me to gain college credits, credit for life experience and eventually a degree	2
Helped to improve my job competence	2
It got my desire for a college education out of my system	1
Other	5

*Percentages total to more than 100 since many respondents identified more than one effect from their experience. The percentages were calculated on the basis of the number of responses for each effect category.

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